



New Poor People's Campaign has the laudable goal of focusing on the neediest among us

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Fifty years ago, a mule train left Marks, Miss., en route to Washington, D.C., starting the Poor People's Campaign. Conceived by Dr. Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference six months earlier, its aim was for the poor to confront America's power structure and shame it into change.

The plan was to erect a Resurrection City on the National Mall and call on Congress to address unemployment, decrepit housing and other pressing problems of the urban and rural poor of every race, ethnic group, gender, sect and tribe from across the country. While it was still in the planning stages, Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis. The daily protests that began in Washington that May fizzled and were broken up by police by late June. The Poor People's Campaign was over.

On April 4, the Rev. William Barber, pastor of the Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, N.C., addressed a huge crowd gathered at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, where Dr. King was shot, on the 50th anniversary of that tragedy. He said it's time for America to get back to addressing the needs of 140 million poor and working poor people and that a new poor people's campaign would begin soon.

"Nothing would be more tragic than for us to turn back now," Barber said in Memphis. "We need a moral revival in America."

Barber is one in a long line of great moral leaders back to Frederick Douglass who have helped influence the nation's course and purpose – among them Ralph Bunch, W.E.B. DuBois, and Dr. King himself. His is a voice that is being heard and a force with which the country's leaders will need to reckon. With his conviction and oratorical skill, people say he has assumed the mantle of Dr. King and the leadership of the Civil Rights Movement. The voiceless are voiceless no more.

"A moral agenda can challenge partisan extremists by refusing to let fear divide black, white and brown who are poor," he said recently on Twitter.

Barber talks about the millions living below the poverty line, the need for a \$15 minimum wage, the suppression of minority voters, the 37 million people without health care, and the hypocrisy of politicians who honor Dr. King in words and dishonor his memory in their approach to "the least of these."

One way to honor Dr. King's memory includes recalling that his last public gesture was taking a brief break from the Poor People's Campaign to help sanitation workers get a living wage and respect as men. Another is to take up his work anew and solve the problems he so articulately outlined. The top item on an agenda that included ending racial and ethnic discrimination and ceasing militarism and the preparation for war was ending poverty. Barber sees that, in so many ways, ending poverty solves most related social injustice. A new focus on poverty renews the country's commitment to its broader creeds.

As members of Congress, we want to commend the Rev. Barber and encourage our nation's leaders to realize the need to fight for the poor. We admire his call to action. We hear his

demand to change the money-driven politics that safeguards the rich and a reform of courts stacked with judges chosen to keep the system intact.

In our own ways, we have been working toward many of the same goals.

One of us represents the Mississippi Delta, one of the poorest, largely rural districts in the country, and the one that includes Marks, where the mule train is commemorated each year. The other represents one of the poorest urban districts in the country, which includes the King murder scene, which has become the National Civil Rights Museum. Many of our constituents are poor people.

Barber and other protesters were arrested in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda on May 21. Their goal of returning the country to a focus on the neediest among us is laudable. In so wealthy a nation, it's unacceptable that many of our colleagues are willing to offer tax breaks to billionaires while talking of axing programs that help the poor, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). Strengthening the safety net and improving programs that help the poor actually end up helping everyone, just as investments in public health make the whole society better off. With more people participating in the economy, the production of goods and services increases and everyone's standard of living improves. As more people feel they have a solid role in society, fewer resources are needed to address criminal justice concerns.

It's unreasonable that this nation, still at war in Afghanistan 17 years on, is led by politicians who think that new fighter planes and new warships are needed to prepare for a future war or that we need to spend more on the military than the next nine countries combined, while next to nothing is done to alleviate the poverty that is so often its spark.

The poor may always be with us, but Barber reminds us that that doesn't mean we accept poverty and look the other way. Dr. King said in 1964 that the world had the resources to get rid of poverty; it only needed to be shown the will.

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